

[Back](#)

Article published Oct 20, 2005

California farmers sow, reap governor's support

SACRAMENTO -- Agriculture has regained its place in California politics by betting the farm on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Tonight it will help keep that place with a \$1,000-a-plate fund-raiser in Fresno.

Four months ago, leaders of California's \$30 billion-a-year agriculture industry felt so unloved by Schwarzenegger's administration that they sent him a letter urging him to save them from "new, burdensome regulations and fees on growers who face the highest operating costs of any state."

Now the California Farm Bureau Federation can proudly report that all but one of the bills it opposed died either in the Legislature or at the hands of Schwarzenegger's veto pen. What's the difference? Strong lobbying, unusual unanimity -- and \$1.74 million in campaign contributions.

Critics smell a quid pro quo.

"This is payback for the governor helping out the industry," said Jamie Court of the Foundation for Taxpayers and Consumers Rights.

Tonight's event will be at the home of food processing magnate Robert Smittcamp, who runs Lyons Magnus. Food processors won a key concession from Schwarzenegger's administration on one of his signature bills this fall.

To be sure, agriculture's contributions amount to little compared to contributions from the real estate and construction industries.

But a Record analysis of state records shows that agriculture has contributed twice as much money to Schwarzenegger in the four months since it delivered that letter than they had in the two years before.

The biggest checks have been from Stockton's Dean Cortopassi, owner of the food processing giant San Tomo Inc., almond and pistachio distributor Paramount Farms, The Wine Group and the farm bureau.

Farm bureau administrator George Gomes said in June that "we don't think just providing money to politicians is the answer to everything. We haven't pursued that angle with Schwarzenegger at all."

On Thursday, Gomes said the \$110,000 his group has contributed to Schwarzenegger's California Recovery Team is tangible evidence of its endorsement of the governor's ballot proposals. He said the farm bureau has become involved in initiative campaigns before.

Gomes said his members are chiefly concerned with Proposition 76, which he hopes will help California balance its budget, and Proposition 77, which he hopes will strip raw politics from the process of divvying up legislative and congressional boundaries.

Raw -- or rather canned, frozen or dried -- politics was anything but stripped from Schwarzenegger's most visible agricultural bill of the past session.

The governor's administration bowed to intense pressure from the Central Valley's nut, raisin and cling peach industries to change Schwarzenegger's legislation to provide "fresh" foods for school kids into a bill to give them "nutritious" foods.

That one word means the industries get a slice of the \$18.2 million set aside for the program. Smittcamp, tonight's host, has contributed \$20,000 to the Schwarzenegger effort since he signed the altered bill.

The farm bureau did not take a position on that legislation, and Gomes says that even with their newfound strength, the realities of California politics will keep the agricultural community on the defensive.

"We just have fewer legislators from rural areas who understand agriculture's contribution to the economy," he said. "Agriculture's still really a pretty small player."

Contact Capitol Bureau Chief Hank Shaw at 916 441-4078 or sacto@recordnet.com
